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WAR-BOOKS IN THE SCHOOLS.

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Never in the history of the world has there been a war so well reported, so thoroughly canvassed, as this — "the hardest, the cruellest, the least-rewarded of all wars that men have fought." The mere output of books is enormous; while practically all the great writers have been drawn into the vortex: Wells, the philosopher; Locke, the novelist; Palmer and R. H. Davis, princes among war-correspondents; Chesterton, keen, kindly, and crotchety critic — to mention no others. And besides these has arisen a host less known, but destined perhaps to no less honour, some of whom have inscribed in their very hearts' blood facts and experiences before which the inventions of fiction grow pale. The books are of variable quality: some possess high literary worth; others show less sense of artistic values; others, again, are merely crude in thought and expression. Good, bad, and indifferent, they are pouring from the presses of the world, and we who are interested in books must in some way take account of them.

How shall we take account? What shall we tell of them to the boys and girls committed to our guidance?

Shall we say, as a lady said recently to the writer: "O, I am sick and tired of the war! Can't we forget all about it?" Shall we warn them, as a certain good minister warned his congregation, against the unsettling influence of war-books? One hesitates, as one remembers. Is the lady "sick" of the war? So are, I presume, the men in the

trenches, with their soaked and muddy uniforms caked about them, and the heavens above them rent with infernal fires. So must have been the battered, indomitable, decimated British legions in those terrible early days around Mons, with the stern cry running along their front: "Carry on, lads!" So, too, the weary French soldiery before Verdun . . . "They shall not pass!" Tired men, these, doubtless quite "sick" of the war. Does the good parson keep his philosophical mind unspotted from the contamination of war-books? Yet thousands of his fellow-ministers are today living through horrors of pain and death such as he never dreamed of in all his sheltered life. There is no doubt, unfortunately, that men who have seen unspeakable sights and borne the burden and heat of awful days cannot write books about their experiences without reflecting images of pity and terror which certainly do tend to "unsettle" the mind. The question is whether our minds ought to remain settled. Still ponds gather green scum.

Again, it is possible, of course, entirely to ignore these records of the most stupendous of wars. "No," said an exponent of this particular stripe of mental detachment, "I never read them. I try to keep myself free from all such thoughts. After all, we have to live together after the war." Probably, in the last analysis, this attitude has its root either in laziness, or in an idealism which is over-tenuous for our rough world. It is the "neutrality-in-thought" attitude; the "boys-out-of-the-trenches-by-Christmas" point of view; the "peace-without-victory" philosophy. If right is right and thousands of our faith and blood are fighting for the right, surely it is a strange mentality which refuses the tribute of even a passing interest. Such doctrine is dangerous, especially so because of the smug sophism of the "live together" statement. Such doctrine, in Kipling's phrase, cripples the sword arm and plays Hell with our notions of duty.

Personally, I believe that we should read, and read widely, the books that come to us out of the war. I believe, moreover, that to us teachers of English there is afforded an unusual opportunity—an opportunity to guide our young people along paths where sound training in English goes hand in hand with matters of the most enthralling interest; where, also, we can inculcate ethical ideals of great and lasting value. Idealistic? Perhaps so. Yet that the attempt, if not the deed, is possible may be illustrated by the ex-

periment of one average teacher of English with a class of average boys.

The problem concerned the adaptability of war literature to school use. Since the class was studying English, the reading was confined to English books—leaving out, even in translation, the superb contribution of France. The first step was to “put it up” to the boys. Each student in the class (32 boys, averaging 14 years of age) was asked to hand in the name of a book that he would like to read. The list, which showed intelligence, was as follows—the figures indicating the numbers choosing the various books. *All In It* (7), *Flying for France* (6), *Over the Top* (4), *Between the Lines* (4), *America Entangled* (2), *Last Voyage of the Lusitania* (2), *The First Seven Divisions* (2), *Sea Warfare* (2), *Carry on, Grapes of Wrath*, *France at War*. This seemed to be a reasonable starting-point. The list was slightly revised and each boy got his book. He was required to read it, and then to hand in a written report expressing his opinion with perfect frankness. Next, the volumes were interchanged and the boys gave talks before the class (3-4 minutes) on some character or situation which had impressed them. The reaction was extremely interesting: one felt that there had been a real gain not only in arousing enthusiasm, which was to be expected, but also in stimulating an interest that was occasionally of actual value as criticism. One lad, for example, treated very intelligently certain questions of taste as between Empey’s *Over the Top* and Ian Hay’s *All In It*. The master obtained a little more insight into those eager young minds.

The next step was eminently practical. “We go upon the practical mode of teaching, Nickleby,” said Mr. Squeers, upon a memorable occasion. “The regular education system. C-l-e-a-n, verb active, to make bright, to scour. W-i-n, win, d-e-r, der, winder, a casement. When the boy knows this out of a book, he goes and does it.” So when these boys had made their list, they went and printed it. The class is the fortunate proprietor of a press, which is a great help in their English work; the list was revised and enlarged, and the young printers turned out a neat little pamphlet.

This printed list—a tentative one—was given out to the whole School. The boys in all other classes were asked to comment upon it freely; criticisms and suggestions were welcomed. There, for the time, the matter rests; but from

these suggestions and criticisms, supplemented by the more mature judgment of the teachers, a final list will be compiled, printed, and distributed. This will, perhaps, possess some permanent value.

It should be noted here that as the reading was done for class work in English, an effort was made to show why even books written, as were so many of these, under stress, obey certain laws. The young readers discovered, to their surprise, that the effect of these interesting volumes was due in no small measure to the careful choice of good words, to the skilful weaving together of sentences and paragraphs, to the presentation of ideas in related order. They found that vague terms like Description and Climax were a part of the actual scheme of things; that Restrictive Clauses had a purpose other than lurking in obscure corners to trap the unwary; and they gained a respect for matters of technique which had cast a visionary gloom over their cheerful lives. They found that men who stood for most things that a healthy boy admires also stood for clear written English. It was a valuable experience.

Let us turn to the reading list. In the first place, it was intended for school use. Hence, many books that would appeal to the adult intelligence find no place. Again, it was a trial list, framed partly to provoke discussion. But it had the result of bringing to a head the whole question of war reading, and every book mentioned has been read by one or more of the boys. The books were roughly divided into several groups.

1. The first group comprised stories of the war written by soldiers. Eight titles were listed, some of which may be mentioned. *The First Hundred Thousand*, in its excellent literary style, its humor, its fine restraint, its power of suggesting all the horrors of war without insisting upon gruesome details, is probably the best book of the war. *Over the Top* (A. G. Empey) is written from the Tommy's point of view, and forms an interesting contrast to the former account. *The First Seven Divisions* (Captain Hamilton) gives a history of the first British Expeditionary Force—the "Old Contemptibles"—original army that held back the Germans from Calais and perished in doing it. A remarkable work; from a professional standpoint the most striking that has appeared. *Action Front* (Boyd Cable) is the best of several unusual books by the writer. *Trenching at Gallipoli* (J. Gallishaw) chronicles the work of the New-

foundland Regiment on the Dardanelles. *On the Right of the British Line* (G. Nobbs) is the story of a strong spirit unsubdued by fighting, blindness, or captivity.

2. Next, the work of the war-correspondent. Kipling's *France at War* is a charming and sympathetic monograph. Richard Harding Davis wrote *With the Allies* in the very early stages of the war, and this, together with Alexander Powell's *Fighting in Flanders*, possesses an interest which in the mad rush of the past three years has become almost historic. Frederick Palmer, with quite exceptional opportunities to see the planning as well as the execution of the work of war-making, has written illuminating books—*My Year of the Great War* and *My Second Year of the War*. John Masefield's *Gallipoli* treats more broadly the Allied expedition to the Dardanelles.

3. The naval side of the great war is represented by several good books. Kipling, in *Sea-Warfare*, was a first-hand study of the British Navy in wartime: a masterly presentation of men and ships, permeated by his vivid and peculiar power. *A Tall Ship*, by a Naval officer—whose *nom de Guerre* of "Bartimeus" tells its own sad tale—is written from the inside and contains some remarkable pictures of Navy life under the strain of war. Nothing better of the kind has appeared since Marryat. Authoritative and interesting in *The British Navy at War*. With its maps and plans it gives an accurate history of the comings out and goings in of the King's ships during three busy years.

4. A number of books have appeared in which, for one reason or another, the personality of the author stands out with appealing charm against the vast background of strife and suffering. *My Home In the Field of Honour* (Baroness Huard) and *A Hilltop on the Marne* (Mildred Aldrich) are two of these, written by women who withstood bravely "the wreckful siege of battering days." To the same group was assigned *Carry On* (C. Dawson), a collection of home letters—a noble record of the thoughts and feelings of a young man actually engaged in fighting.

5. It is probably true that no fiction written about the war, and very little poetry, commands the interest and the inspiration of the books that deal with realities. Most war poems are weak; we are too near the tremendous upheaval; the great verse will come ten years after the war.

The fiction, too, is inadequate; one feels the author striving for effects which are discounted utterly by the truth set forth by any fighting man fresh from the trenches or the lonely sea. Nevertheless, one novel and one collection of poetry was placed in our list—*Mr. Britling Sees it Through* (H. G. Wells) and *A Treasury of War Verse* (edited by G. H. Clark). The former has been called the greatest novel of the war—a just judgment, though the novel is in some sort a philosophical treatise. The latter is a useful anthology containing, among a mass of mediocrity, some really notable poems.

6. The last group was added for the benefit of boys who wished to study aspects of the war other than those found in such books as have been mentioned. Four titles only were listed, three of which may be noted here. *The Evidence in the Case* and *The War and Humanity*, by James Beck, together form a most cogent statement of the case against Germany. *Headquarters Nights* (V. Kellogg) is a rather terrible little book written by a converted pacifist. The author had every opportunity to learn at first hand the attitude of German thought not only towards the present war, but also with regard to the whole question of Germany's place in the sun.

So much for the list. It was compiled for schoolboys, largely by schoolboys; the results seem to have justified the compilation.

I have said that these war-books possess certain values apart from their interest or their literary significance. They describe, in language which one does not easily forget, the horror and the devastation of battle. They preach, far better than any pacifist who ever frothed and vaped in the public press, the need that wars should cease in all the world. In not one of them is there any attempt to glorify war as such. "It's a rotten business, war, when you come to think of it." So speaks a typical soldier, and his fellows echo the sentiment. They hate war; they want to be at home; they long to get free of the hideous squalor, the mud, the imminent presence of death.

But out of the squalor and the mud rises a spirit which reaches the heart of the reader, a spirit which is manifest under all the bludgeonings of fate: the indomitable doing of something which is "rotten," horrible—what you will—yet which *has to be done*.

"They're loaded down like pack animals, their shoulders are rounded, they're wearied to death, but they go on and on There's no flash of swords or splendor of uniform. They're only very tired men determined to carry on. The war will be won by tired men who can never again pass an insurance test."

Again:

"These lads are not the kind who philosophize about life; they're the sort, many of them, who wear corduroys, and smoke a cutty pipe. I suppose the Christian martyrs would have done the same had corduroys been in fashion in that day, and if a Roman Raleigh had discovered tobacco."

"The men formed up. The minutes seemed to be like hours. We were facing the inside of the square trench, which was a mass of shell holes, and as though anticipating our intention, shells were bursting and bullets whistling on all sides. . . . And these were the men of England—nice chaps, only Territorials. . . . One used to meet them in the city every day. See them at lunch; watch them pouring out of Liverpool Street Station between 9 and 10 o'clock in the morning, with newspaper and walking-stick; see them in banks, poring over ledgers. You could hardly believe it, but these were the same men."

"War," says a wounded soldier, "is a monstrous machine of the devil. At one end . . . manhood . . . was pouring into its fiery caldron; and here at the other end the devil was raking out the cinders." In every war-book there is ample indication of the author's hatred of the ugly business of war. But duty transcends horror in these strong souls; and there is no indication that any other course is possible, if the dear-bought civilization of the centuries is to be preserved.

Other things may be learned from these books. Splendid achievement; glorious self-sacrifice; the thousand and one deeds of heroism done by nameless soldiers—not under the stimulus of some crowded hour of glorious life, but "where two or three are gathered together," and only because it was playing the game. I think the phrase "doing his bit" originated with the vanished Army of 1914 (how far away!). It is a phrase which should be engraved in letters of gold; for it epitomizes all that silent endurance, that magnificence of unrecorded achievement, that fine humorous under-statement, which is the special war-note of the Anglo-Saxon race.

Is it not worth while in some definite way to bring our boys and girls into contact with books that tell in clear

vigorous English matters of vital and present interest, and in the telling touch their minds to nobler tissues?

That they should understand the speech, and feel a stir
Of fellowship in all disastrous fight.

I should like, in closing, to quote two poems: not only because they are good poetry, but because they summarize so well much that is fine in the literature of the war. The first, by Ian Hay, speaks for the private soldier. The second, by W. M. Letts, commemorates the young student who has gone forth by thousands from his place—and his place shall know him no more. Both meet on a common ground: "We've got work that must be done; we may die in the doing of it, but we'll do our best."

We do not deem ourselves A I,
We have no past: we cut no dash:
Nor hope, when launched against the Hun,
To raise a more than moderate splash.

But yesterday we said farewell
To plough; to pit; to dock; to mill.
For glory? *Drop it!* Why? Oh, well—
To have a slap at Kaiser Bill.

And now today has come along.
With rifle, haversack, and pack,
We're off, a hundred thousand strong.
And—some of us will not come back.

But all we ask, if that befall,
Is this: Within your hearts be writ
This single-line memorial:—
He did his duty—and his bit!

I saw the spires of Oxford,
As I was passing by,
The gray spires of Oxford
Against a pearl-gray sky.
My heart was with the Oxford men
Who went abroad to die.

The years go fast in Oxford,
The golden years and gay,
The hoary Colleges look down
On careless boys at play.
But when the bugles sounded war
They put their games away.

They left the peaceful river,
The cricket-field, the quad,
The shaven lawns of Oxford,
To seek a bloody sod—
They gave their merry youth away
For country and for God.

God rest you, happy gentlemen,
Who laid your good lives down,
Who took the khaki and the gun
Instead of cap and gown.
God bring you to a fairer place
Than even Oxford town.

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